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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 July 1987

Ecuador Overview

Summary

The pro-US government of President Febres-Cordero has been severely weakened by recent economic reversals, including the two year decline in world oil prices and the earthquake in March, as well as by the growing political strength of antagonistic leftist parties. Chiefly because Febres-Cordero still enjoys the backing of the military, he will likely complete his term which expires in August 1988. The political environment, however, has become highly polarized and Ecuadorean democracy could be placed in jeopardy, particularly if the military finds it necessary to use force to silence leftist agitation or restore public order. The left's steady criticism of the US road building program has made it the latest focal point in civil military relations. The political interplay over the US presence when Congress opens next month will likely start a new round of protracted tensions that could persist into next year's presidential elections.

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The "Opening Roads" Program

The primary purpose of the "Opening Roads" project, which began in May, was to provide relief for more than 100,000 inhabitants of eastern Ecuador who

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were isolated by the March 1987 earthquakes. Because the main road into the region was destroyed, the reconstruction was intended to facilitate the transportation of food and medical care into the affected area. The project calls for upgrading about 60 kilometers of road between Loreto and Tena, and includes the installation of bridges provided by the Agency for International Development. The Ecuadorean government is responsible for construction materials, while the United States is providing technical assistance and manpower. []

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About 600 US National Guard and Army reservists, many of whom had been transferred from a US Corps of Engineers road project in western Ecuador, are involved in the program. At present they have completed about 10 kilometers of dirt and gravel road, approximately 24 feet wide. If the project continues through mid-November as scheduled, an additional 7 to 10 kilometers may be completed. []

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Mounting Challenge from the Left

Leftist opposition parties--which range from center-left to Maoist--have seized on the US troop presence to attack the administration in hopes of boosting their electoral prospects. The leftist controlled Congress, in an extraordinary one day session on 15 July, called for the immediate withdrawal of US troops. President Febres-Cordero has said publicly he will ignore the resolution, which is non-binding, but Congress will probably return to the issue when it reconvenes for its normal two month session on 10 August. The Ecuadorean military has been especially irritated by congressional criticism of the US troop presence, which they regard as a military matter in which politics has no role. []

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The road-building controversy is only the latest challenge from the left to Febres-Cordero's weakened presidency. It has focused on the country's severe economic problems in the wake of the earthquake and has organized several antigovernment demonstrations that have involved some violence. In March, for example, far leftists organized a nationwide work stoppage that virtually paralyzed Quito and other major cities and left several policemen and demonstrators severely injured. Since then, they have followed up with a series of relatively successful, but less violent, municipal and provincial workers' strikes. []

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We believe, leftist parties--including both moderates and pro-communist groups--in our opinion, will keep the pressure on the President to boost their popular support in preparation for the first round of the election in January.* Elements within the far-left may try to remove Febres-Cordero from office, but lack unity and are unlikely to be successful. Frequent clashes that require military intervention may occur however. []

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*With 17 political parties participating in Ecuador's elections, two rounds of balloting involving a runoff are standard procedure. []

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Military Unease

The deep political divisions in Ecuador have resulted in strong military resentment against the left. Military chiefs blame the left for much of the recent turmoil, including a series of Air Force mutinies in support of former Air Force Commander Vargas, who had rebelled against Febres-Cordero. As a result, the military--particularly the conservative Army--has become Febres-Cordero's principal defender. []

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Military backing for the President ensures that he will probably remain in office for the last year of his term, but prolonged clashes with the left will sap the government's strength and increase its dependence on the armed forces. Some high-ranking Army officers have, on several occasions, offered to install Febres-Cordero as a civilian dictator, but he has refused. Nevertheless, we judge that Ecuador's democratic succession could be placed in jeopardy by the politicization of the military, its mounting resentment of the left's campaign, and the likelihood of an electoral victory by the center-left--coupled with gains by the far-left--in next year's elections. []

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